Being Online Peer Supporter-ed: Experiences from a Work-based Learning Programme

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Abstract

Problem Statement: Work-based learning programmes have become an increasingly popular way of fulfilling the desire for life-long learning; multi-dimensional work-based learning modes have recently played a large role in both personal and institutional development. The peculiarity of this innovative way of learning derives from the fact that learning is gained from work experience. Work-based learning programmes were pioneered in undergraduate, graduate and doctorate programmes. This learning process represents a unique approach to knowledge and has created a new paradigm in educational thinking, with a specific epistemology and methodology. The learning cycle relies on active learning through work experience, with an emphasis on project management capability. In addition, it provides an opportunity for researchers to engage in on-line discussions with tutors and fellow students. In this respect, the role of the online peer support process in work-based research projects is worth investigating.

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Purpose of the Study: This study aimed to determine how the use of online communication tools for peer support within the work-based learning paradigm impacts learners' self-development. Specifically, it focused on whether peer-supporter-ed and -supportive roles enacted via on-line tools in work-based learning programmes enhanced learners' collaboration and research management skills. It also examined whether online communication facilitated critical thinking.
Methods: The research conducted was qualitative in nature, with a case study approach. In-depth interviews, self-reports and researcher observations were the data collection techniques used to explore the experiences of participants in relation to the research focus. Triangulation was employed with multiple data analysis.
Findings and Results: This study unveiled the benefits of peer supporter-ed friendships within work-based learning programmes to the construction of work-based projects grounded in bounded rationality. It should be highlighted that online communication tools are extremely useful to candidates who are studying and communicating from a distance. Significantly, the findings demonstrated that being engaged in different research contexts is not a barrier to learning; online communication tools provide users with the opportunity to give mutual support. The research presented here highlighted the ways in which online communication tools facilitate critical thinking, collaboration and research management skills.
Conclusions and Recommendations: It is proposed that a model for work-based learning that explores candidates' roles as peer supporters be developed, so as to further the building of critical friendships through online communication. It is also urged that collaborative effort be encouraged as a means of achieving plausible outcomes within the work-based research process.
Keywords: Collaboration, online communication, peer support, work-based learning

The work experience is surely crucial in lifelong learning and continuing professional development (CPD) contexts. CPD encourages flexibility in human resources, as what is learned from work experience is crucial to both the needs of institutional and professional development. In this respect, the work-based learning process is essential to building knowledge and improving work practices, as it builds a bridge between the learning needs of the individual and the strategic needs of the institution (Costley, Armsby, 2007; Raelin, 1997). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that ways be found to apply the work-based learning process, from which individuals, work groups and institutions benefit alike. The method of learning relies on a range of methodologies and techniques, facilitation, mentoring, action learning, focus groups, problem-based learning, reflection, and critical and strategic questioning (Rhodes, Shiel, 2007). It is therefore evident that the value of the work-based learning process is in the development of skills.

Work-based learning is a modern way of providing university-level learning in the workplace. This model delivers learning tailored to the specific needs of both the institution and the individual producing new knowledge and skills. These skills can be categorized as: self-promotion, the exploration and creation of opportunities, action planning, networking, matching and decision-making, negotiation, political awareness, coping with uncertainty, development focus, skill transfer, self-confidence, and self-awareness. Work-based learning enhances self-reliance.

The WBL process represents a peculiar approach to knowledge, where learner-practitioners are able to reflect in-action and on action (Schön, 1983), using current knowledge to make an impact within their communities of practice. New pedagogies of work and learning have emerged (Rhodes, Shiel, 2007). Although work-based learning involves a lack of social presence, as it makes participants responsible for accomplishing different modules through self-discipline but without a physical classroom, it has the value of promoting skill development.

The distinctive characteristic of the work-based learning approach is that it is a field of degrees that includes masters and doctorates in Professional Studies, as well as postgraduate awards in Professional Development. Work-based learning was first developed as a field of study within the United Kingdom (UK), but an increasing amount of international research is being conducted using online communication (Lester, 2007; Workman, 2007).

Work-based learning and professional studies have a generic framework, with a final work-based project. Delivery modes include on-campus, by distance learning or as part of a corporate group. The distance learning approach enables researchers to access learning materials and engage in on-line discussions with tutors and fellow students. Work-based learning programmes typically have five steps: recognition and accreditation of learning (RAL), programme planning, work-based research and development methods and, finally, a work-based project. These steps lead to the target qualification (http://www.mdx.ac.uk/wbl/about/how.asp).

During the learning process, communication among candidates plays an important role in sharing and building knowledge. It is important for candidates to work together toward a common purpose. Distance learners can collaborate synchronously, via online meetings and instant messaging, or asynchronously, via e-mails and shared workspaces and forums. The collaborative life cycle gives candidates the chance to engage in varying degrees of awareness, motivation, self-synchronization, participation, mediation, reciprocity, reflection and engagement. Therefore, the concept of peer support has become significant to the need for collaboration. Peer support involves the provision of emotional or practical help to others (Gibbs, Angelides, 2007; Gibbs, Angelides, 2008). In this study, the following figure is used as a framework to explore the role of peer support through online communication tools in work-based research conducted within a work-based learning programme (Heisler, 2006).

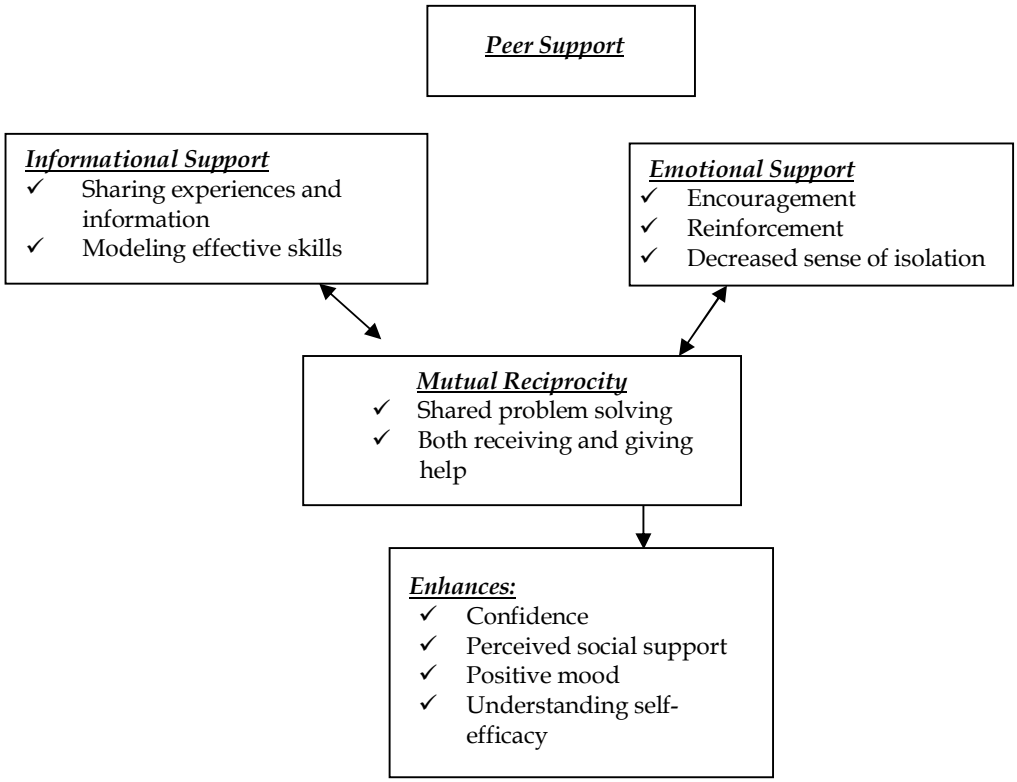

Figure 1. Peer Support Framework

This study investigated the development of the peer support process for Doctor of Professional Studies candidates through online communication tools. It thereby assessed opportunities for peer support to enhance research management skills.

The following research questions were answered with an inductive approach:

1. What are the advantages of being peer supporter-ed at the doctoral level within a work-based learning programme?
2. How do online communication tools foster/limit the knowledge-sharing of distance learners?
3. To what extent and how do learners develop peer support using online communication tools?
4. How do distance learners enhance their peer supporter-ed through online communication tools at the doctoral level within work-based learning programmes?

Method

As qualitative research aims to capture individual experiences within social contexts, it interprets and considers socially-constructed meanings through the lens of human experience (Bogdan, Biklen, 1992; Marshall, Rossman, 1999, Cohen, Morrison, Manion, 2000). Phenomenology is considered to be a framework within the inductive process, due to the descriptive nature of participants' input.

Often, in qualitative research, a small number of subjects are studied extensively and for a prolonged period, so that their social patterns and relationships may be understood (Creswell, 1994). Great effort is made to prevent bias. In this study, one member of the research team became an independent researcher. In coordinating the research process and interpreting data, this person acted as a moderator, guiding the study while also being a fly on the wall (Wolcott, 1995). As qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experiences of people, qualitative researchers engage in systematic reflection on their own roles in this research.

Qualitative research entails the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and is focused on the meanings attributed by participants to these interactions, which underlines a broad approach to the study of social phenomena (Marshall, 1999; Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000).

Furthermore, as qualitative research is inductive and context-bound, it provides patterns and theories for understanding subjective reality. In this respect, experiences, socially-constructed meanings, communications, negotiations and interactions became critical to the inductive processes used in this type of research (Silverman, 2005).

Case Study Approach

Case study research focuses on "…attempting to document the story of a naturalistic-experiment-in-action, the routine moves educators and learners make in a clearly known and readily defined discursive, conceptual and professional space (the "case"), and the consequences of other people's actions, foreseen and otherwise, for learning and for the ongoing conduct of the research" (Yin, 1994). With the present research, a case study approach was used to completely describe a phenomenon in its own context and to conduct and disseminate research that would impact practice.

Case studies are a useful way of exploring existing theories in isolated contexts. Here, a case study was used to investigate and report on the complex dynamics, interactions and experiences of participants in a work-based learning programme. The research presents a concrete, detailed narrative of actual events (Freebody, 2003; Yin, 1994). The researchers attempted to explore what they perceived as significant features and to create reasonable interpretations of their findings, test the trustworthiness of their interpretations, construct worthwhile arguments or stories, relate these arguments to relevant literature and provide findings that other researchers could validate or challenge by presenting alternative arguments.

Participants

Three Doctor of Professional Studies candidates at Middlesex University participated in this study. One was in safety management, and the other two were in education. The participants had in common that they were researchers in the Programme of Professional Studies, each engaged in a work-based research project. Although the number of participants was limited, the role of peer support provided through online communication in developing credible work-based projects was investigated in depth. Collaboration among participants yielded satisfactory insight into how the process worked and revealed practical solutions for constructing better work-based projects within the programme. The DProf candidates were in part two or in the research phase of the programme, working on implementing their work-based projects in professional contexts.

Purposive sampling was employed. Two participants came from the same professional context, while the third was in a different working environment. In addition, two of the participants practiced peer supporter-ed process. They used online communication to collaborate and internalize how to be peer supporters. They also became models for further studies. One of the researchers became an independent researcher and observer for a year, so as to moderate the research process while being a 'fly on the wall', reporting on peer support and its impact on research projects within the professional studies programme.

Participation was voluntary. Participants willingly revealed that they communicated through online tools such as WebCT, Skype, and email. Purposive sampling was used, and a volunteer peer support group was constructed in a natural way.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

In-depth interviews, self-reports, and researcher observations were the data collection methods employed to explore participants' experiences with using peer support to enhance work-based projects through online communication, negotiation and discussion (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000).

The in-depth interviews formed the basis for exploring participants' perceptions and experiences of the impact of peer supporter/ed on their own projects. These interviews, carried out by the independent researcher, covered eight questions, which were first piloted and then reviewed by experts, in order to enhance their credibility. Interviews took about 50 minutes each and covered learning and professional development, online communication tools within the programme, the process of peer support and peer support's contributions to the construction of work-based projects within the programme.

Self-reports provided participants with the opportunity to reflect upon the peer support process, the use of online tools and peer support's contribution to their programme. The peer support model (see Figure 1) was given to participants, to familiarize them with its stages and expected outcomes. The framework of this research was then reviewed and accepted by experts. Figure 1, which illustrates the peer support framework, provides a rationale for the themes used in analysis of the

gathered data. Data analysis was based on informational and emotional support, as well as mutual reciprocity.

Researcher observations, based on a checklist, were used to record the complex dynamics of interactions and negotiations among participants. The independent researcher actively reported observations of the research process in relation to the research focus. The observation checklist covered the stages and the fundamental components of the peer support process. A structured observation checklist was created and reviewed by experts. Furthermore, multiple types of data were triangulated, based on the peer support model framework (see Figure 1).

The data were analyzed using content analysis. Themes were selected and analyzed with regard to the research questions and the objectives of the peer support framework (Altinay, Paraskevas, 2008). Ethics is at the heart of the research process. In this respect, the researchers were careful to prevent bias and to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Participant consent forms were used, to ensure that data could be reported and published. Although the case study was small, multiple data collection methods and data triangulation helped to enhance the richness and validity of the data, allowing for the collection of in-depth participant experiences within the work-based learning programme (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Bryman, 2004).

The credibility of this study was ensured by expert reviews of the data. Triangulation of the data based on the peer support framework ensured the credibility of the research findings.

Results

The findings revealed that being peer-supported or -supportive within a work-based learning programme is beneficial and is recommendable for candidates who seek to create work-based projects based on bounded rationality. It should be underlined that online communication tools are a very constructive means of communication for distance-learning students. Significantly, it has been demonstrated that being in different professional contexts and being geographically distant is not a barrier to expression, as online communication tools provide the opportunity to share experiences and mutual support. The peer support framework was explored by using data collection techniques to study the informational support, emotional support, mutual reciprocity, and enhancement that are part of and result from the peer support process.

In-depth Interview Findings

In regard to informational support as a component of peer support, in-depth interviews showed that participants shared experiences and information about the construction of work-based projects. Participants were in the research stages of their work-based projects and used WebCT, email and Skype to exchange information and experiences. Further, two of the participants cited the benefits of online communication tools for learning. They emphasized the opportunity afforded by

being in different fields to gain professional practice and professional development. One participant noted, "Being in a work-based learning programme and being peer-supporter/ed taught us how to be friends, as we are from different cultures and fields." In this respect, participants agreed that being peer-supported in terms of informational support, enhanced teamwork, critical thinking and the ability to apply bounded rationality to the creation of work-based projects in different subjects.

In regard to emotional support, participants revealed that they were confident in encouraging one another. They stated that using online communication tools to provide reinforcement enhanced their performance. One participant stated, "My peer supporter encouraged me to remain enthusiastic while implementing my work-based project." The same participant said, "I learned that it is the quality, not the quantity, of messages that is significant when learning new information and garnering suggestions for my work-based project". Further, another participant stated, "Encouragement and motivation of my peers enhanced my learning and helped me construct better critical commentary on my work-based project." Participants agreed that the emotional support provided by online communication, including encouragement, reinforcement and decreased sense of isolation, was the most significant indicator of success.

Enhancement is an important outcome of peer supporter-ed. Research participants stated that their learning, collaboration and sharing improved as the result of their work-based learning. This makes them be made them confident, strengthened their social support and positively reinforced their sense of self-efficacy.

Findings from the Self-Reports

In regard to informational support, participants' self-reports confirmed that participants shared sufficient experiences and information about projects. They gave concrete examples of how they exchanged information and developed skills, with regard to informational support.

One participant reported:

Although I had contact with few candidates, I developed a peer support relationship with only one individual. I have shared information about the programme structure, the RAL requirements and the oral presentation for the Programme Approval Panel (PAP). The latter was the starting point of a fruitful peer support and a real friendship with the aforementioned fellow candidate. We initially started to communicate via email and asynchronously through the University's VLE. We then started using a synchronous way to communicate through Skype, free VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software which permits also videoconferencing. This tool enabled us to communicate in an effective way and most importantly in real time. I used this tool for a dummy presentation of my project proposal. It was an effective way to test practically my presentation in a web-based videoconference very similar to the one I would use with the university PAP. We critically discussed the content as well as the structure of the presentation. This has built my confidence, and the critical commentary, along with the feedback from my academic advisor, has surely enhanced my proposal.

Another participant reported on informational support:

I had contact with my peer that it was highly satisfied for me to exchange information and experiences in our subject fields. We communicated through WebCT, Skype and emails, to follow and exchange our progress on review of learning, developing proposal and implementing effective work-based project in our work context within the programme regulations. We found a chance to negotiate the structure and the content of those documents which this has great role to develop critical friendship, bounded rationality and confidence to produce better work.

Candidates stated that they found opportunities to exchange information and discuss learning experiences and what they attempted to implement during the peer support process.

As concerns emotional support, participants, especially those not from the UK originally, reported that engaging in online communication and negotiation decreased their sense of isolation within the work-based learning programme.

One participant noted:

I would also like to highlight the role played by the emotional support in a peer support relationship. The isolation of the DL [distance learning] students can be, at times, challenging. In my own experience, I found it extremely useful, the support given, in terms of motivation. Often, peers formally or informally set a mutual agreement with a timeline for specific tasks, such as, for instance, completing a phase of the research project or a chapter review. This mutual agreement is an incentive to complete the task within the deadline and to overcome the sense of isolation typical of a DL environment. It can also be seen as a practical answer for the question "what to do and when to do it" earlier expressed.

Another participant reported on emotional support as follows:

Before having a contact with my peer supporter, I felt isolated because of not sharing any information with any DProf candidates. Making negotiation, exchange of ideas put emphasis on my enthusiasm to make better works in the DProf journey as an encouragement, reinforcement. This contact makes to report every week good action to my friend and through this way I accomplished what I expected in my journey.

Online communication and peer support – particularly, negotiation and discussion of the work-based learning process – provided participants with encouragement and reinforcement. Significantly, participants appreciated that somebody was following what they were doing and helping them further the progress of their work-based projects.

In regard to mutual reciprocity, participants reported that in their negotiations and discussions, they developed empathy that helped them problem solve and complete tasks.

One participant reported on mutual reciprocity as follows:

I believe that [with] peer support, there is mutual understanding among us that we understand each other within negotiation process of our research actions. Also, we are flexible and emphatic on scheduling our meeting time in Skype, which is also example of our mutuality.

Another participant said:

Mutual support is indeed emotionally rewarding for both peers: the supported experiences a sense of appreciation and a positive reinforcement for the work done, while the supporter experiences a sense of recognition and accomplishment for the support given. In addition, the peer supported is then encouraged by own experience to act as supporter when applicable and practicable, starting then a new cycle of peer support this time with the roles inverted.

Significantly, participants reported that being peer-supported or -supportive in their work-based learning programme improved their confidence, perceived social support, mood and understanding of their own self-efficacy.

Findings from Observations

The independent researcher's observations suggested that participants were enthusiastic about improving their work-based projects. They demonstrated good informational support, exchanging information about the work-based learning process and their academic and personal lives. Significantly, they discussed learning, developing proposals and implementing work-based projects in a strategic manner. The observer reported that the process pushed participants to develop an understanding of how to look at issues from different perspectives, i.e., how to engage in critical thinking.

The independent researcher reported that participants were willing to communicate, negotiate and discuss specific ways of improving their studies. To this end, they collaborated, engaged in critical analysis and managed learning and research for one another in the natural way that is the essence of the peer support process.

The independent researcher also reported that the peer support provided by participants reflected the discovery of a mutual understanding of the research process in work-based learning programmes. Empathic reflections on and analysis of tasks that they developed provided evidence of how they had been involved in mutual reciprocity within the framework of peer support.

Researcher observations, as reported by a checklist, showed that peer support and online communication enhanced critical thinking, collaboration and research management within the work-based learning programme. Significantly, participant self-reports underlined the fact that the online communication tools used in work-based learning facilitated critical thinking, collaboration and research management. Each of these was explored in detail in relation to the impact of peer support within the programme, as the development of these skills is the outcome of work-based learning.

Critical thinking is a fundamental ability that is transferable to life and future learning (Bennett, Dunne, Care, 1999). It is necessary to develop critical thinking, in order to carry out successful work-based projects. Critical thinking implies an understanding of work context, roles and responsibilities, and desired outcomes. It also involves encouraging others to defend and justify their views and to identify outcomes and present constructive and critical analysis of context. Critical thinking provides an external perspective on and challenge to professional values, concerns, priorities and actions. Finally, it helps thinkers offer valued judgments only when asked to conceptualize others' ideas and identify strategic options. Participants reflected on the relationship between their peer support experience and the development of their critical thinking skills, using such concrete examples as the messages exchanged during their online communications. The statements and messages of participants are shown in Table I, which reveals that online communication and work-based learning facilitated the growth of critical thinking skills within the work-based learning context; however, participants did not comment on their critical thinking abilities.

Collaboration is another significant ability within the work-based learning programme and the peer support process. Collaboration includes offering positive support and avoiding directing; encouraging others as they make decisions; clarifying the ideas of others; encouraging specificity in others; encouraging mutual respect and trust; engaging in reciprocal relationships; responding reflectively and promptly to messages; giving feedback relevant to the main focus of tasks and negotiating tasks with others (Bennett, Dunne, Care, 1999). Participants' statements and messages on collaboration are shown in Table II. Although collaboration ability was developed via peer support, participants did not provide feedback on "encouraging specificity in others" and "giving feedback relevant to the main focus of the task".

Research management is the core element of work-based learning programmes. Candidates need both research and management skills to carry out work-based projects and improve their work practices. Research management involves investigating, reframing and self-managing one's capabilities; conducting document searches and data collection; reading scholarly materials; articulating inquiry paradigms and allocating the time necessary to understand work context and take initiative when approved (Bennett, Dunne, Care, 1999). Participants' statements and messages on the topic of research management are shown in Table III, from which it is evident that participants developed their research management abilities with the guidance and support of others within the work-based learning programme. However, they did not articulate inquiry paradigms or allocate the time required to understand the context of their work.

Table 1

Critical Thinking

Statements	*Messages of Participant 1*	*Messages of Participant 2*
Fully understand the context of the work	"Yes, totally agree; self-disclosure makes you to create right understanding, rather than making reality by your own"	"I had a small Focus Group today, plus I made about 5 observations I am building a theory...."
Fully understand roles and responsibilities		"Yes, but at the same time difficult to be in two roles…"
Fully understand the desired outcomes of the work	"Success and reality rely on this difficulty. That's why I like culture, getting meanings from people, but at the same finding right and common understanding – you know, self disclosure in communication"	
Encourage others to defend and justify views	"Giving critique also clarify your idea and perception on Douglas' theory"	"Doesn't matter numbers of people, I think. Data is important and its impact"
Identify outcomes		"I have different measurable indices to see the positioning of the group in the two dimensional framework"
Present constructive, critical analysis of context	"I am going to send you consent forms to look at giving critique [and] also clarify your idea and perception on Douglas theory"	"Thanks for checking these details! did you read the papers I sent you?"
Provide external perspective and challenge		"If I do Focus Groups with ¾ individuals, what do you think; is it ok": "Yes, normal is four, but it is enough, I think"
Reflect systematically on professional values, concerns, priorities and actions in relation to study support	"Did I send you adviser and consultancy form before?"	
Offer value judgments only when asked		
Conceptualize ideas of others		"I have received the power point thanks, did you change anything?"
Identify strategic options	"And also next week example on in-depth interviews and focus groups"	

Table 2
Collaboration

Statements	***Messages of Participant 1***	***Messages of Participant 2***
	"You studied yesterday"	
Offer positive support and avoid directing	"That's why my progress is good. I arranged every detail for project. After finishing, I don't know what I am going to do – may be publications"	"Even if it is sometime difficult to do as planned, plans are made to be changed! Isn't it?"
Encourage others when decision making	"Sure, I am searching for the paper in my computer!"	"Keep research diary also" "Yes I am doing it"
Share responsibility with others for learning	"Did I send you adviser and consultancy form before?"	"I am working on my chapter V ... I am doing observations, and I will start soon with interviews"
Clarify the ideas of others		"A good paper here: http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/wbdocs.pdf about work-based doctorates. You can read it when you have time. It is interesting"
Encourage specificity in others		

Table 2 *Contd.*

Statements	Messages of Participant 1	Messages of Participant 2
Encourage a climate of mutual respect and trust e.g. Engage in reciprocal relationships that involve offering and taking support from others/respecting the views of others	"Ok can you talk? It is easier than typing...:) Ok thanks I saw your email. I also cannot access webct Yes, I think there is problem. Also, respect is the key solution to create an environment of common understanding"	"Yes, the same difficulties you had with your focus groups ..."
Respond reflectively and promptly to messages	"I am sending to you in five minutes through skype. Now, I am going now to class. Come back 30 minutes later. Is it okey for you?"	
Give feedback relevant to the main focus of the task – avoid vagueness		
Negotiate tasks with others	"I am going to send you consent forms to look at"	

Table 3

Research Management

Statements	*Messages of Participant 1*	*Messages of Participant 2*
Scholarly reframing Investigative reframing	"It is good. It is theoretical frame about what I think. I think the practicality of critical friendship"	
Show evidence of managing self		"Yes, I am drafting chapter 4, but I want to finish my data collection before finish it"
Encourage documentation		"I have some papers to share with you about the PhD and DProf. I will send them to you"
Encourage collection of data	"I will send the paper from P. Gibbs"	"Then I will triangulate the data with obs, diary and interviews to strength the validity"
Read scholarly material		"Have you read the paper I sent you, about DProf?"
Articulate inquiry paradigms		
Allocate adequate time to understand work context		
Take initiative when appropriate	"I will also check deadline for you, whether you can start earlier, after minor revisions. Okay, when you want something let me know, if I can make, it is appreciated to do for you"	"Hi, I hope you have sent your file : Hi I have received your file yesterday thanks"

Findings from Triangulated Data

In-depth interviews, self-reports and researcher observations confirmed that participants developed collaboration skills when they developed proposals and presentations for the approval panel and when they wrote chapters of the work-based project based on negotiations, reflections and discussions. Being critical friends within a work-based learning programme developed students' abilities to reflect, use bounded rationality and critical thinking while writing chapters, search literature reviews and prepare critical commentary. The findings confirmed that carrying out

work-based projects with the support of peers, advisors and programme staff helped candidates build better projects and enhance their research management skills.

Discussion and Conclusion

As change implies development, project management is key to successful research practice. Work-based projects recognise and enhance workplace learning. These projects are, in fact, associated with both social and work-based contexts (Rhodes, Shiel, 2007). In addition, work-based research encapsulates researchers' practical and intellectual capabilities (Costley, Armsby 2007; Lester, 2007). There are six key components of work-based learning, described by Boud and Solomon (2001): Worked-based learning, first, must involve a partnership between an organisation and a university, geared toward fostering learning. It must also involve a contractual relationship between learners and the external organization. The programme followed must be derived from the needs of the workplace, and the work must be the curriculum. In addition, learners must recognise their current competencies prior to entering the programme of study and, at the programme's end, the university must assess learning outcomes.

While conducting work-based research projects, the importance of social interaction among research practitioners engaged in work-based learning needs to be considered. Critical friendships are based on mutual critiques of participants' practices and on mutual support. Such friendship enhances collaboration, critical thinking and research management in the Doctorate of Professional Studies journey (Gibbs, Angelides, 2008).

This study explored the role of online communication and peer support in work-based learning. The peer support relationship is based on shared experiences, mutual respect and empathy, providing both emotional and informational support by enhancing collaboration among friends. In this respect, the role of peer supporter or supported is significant because it entails enhanced support and guidance, social benefits, increased academic confidence and improved communication, teamwork, and collaborative problem solving and interpersonal skills.

In relation to the focus of this research, online communication tools serve a constructive purpose, regardless of candidates' geographical locations. It was demonstrated that being in different professional contexts is not a barrier to communication, but that, rather, online communication tools provide opportunities for mutual support, although work-based learning programmes lack social presence among learners and colleagues. In this study, online communication tools were revealed to be a way of overcoming lack of social presence and idea exchange. In this respect, participants developed their collaboration and research management skills within the programme while managing their research projects and gaining motivation to think critically.

This study contributed to the academic agenda by:

- Expanding knowledge of the role of collaboration in the peer support process
- Enhancing understanding of the roles of peer supporters in work-based learning environments
- Exposing the importance of online communication tools to the construction of

knowledge

- Developing deeper insight into constructive criticism, empathy and mutual understanding
- Expanding knowledge of how to practice supporting the professional development of peer supporters and supported
- Critically reflecting on enhancing such generic skills as critical thinking, collaboration and research management

Future studies could examine the theoretical framework of peer support at the institutional level, focusing on the roles of institutional and advisor support in enhancing candidates' collaboration, critical thinking and research management skills as candidates implement work-based projects in work-based learning professional studies doctoral programmes. Qualitative and quantitative methods could be used together, and sample size could be increased, to improve the density and richness of data.

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Çevrimiçi Ortamda Paydaş Desteği: İş Yaşamı Temelli Öğrenim Programında Kazanılan Tecrübeler (Özet)

Problem Durumu: İş yaşamı temelli öğrenimin giderek yaygınlaştığı günümüzde, iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim kurumlarda çalışan personelin gelişmesi ve kurumların iyileştirilmesinde büyük önem taşımaktadır. İş yaşamı temelli öğrenimin yer aldığı programlar, özellikle Middlesex Üniversitesinin sağladığı iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim imkanı, kurum çalışanlarının mesleki gelişimlerine katkı sağlamakla ortaya koyduğu yaşam boyu eğitim felsefesi göz ardı edilememektedir. Middlesex Üniversitesi iş yaşamı temelliöğrenme sürecini 1993'ten bu yana doktora programlarında profosyonel anlamda çalışmalar yapan adaylara çeşitli yetenek yelpazaleri sunarak bu duruma öncülük etmektedir. Bu öğrenme süreci, eğitimde farklı boyutlarda düşünme, kendi kendini yetiştirme, tecrübelere dayalı yeni bilgileri oluşturma ve bilgiyi uygulama, uygulamaya dönük faaliyetleri temel alarak kurum ve kurum çalışanlarının gelişmesini desteklemeyi kapsamaktadır. Böylelikle, hem araştırmacıya hem de meslektaşlarına katkı sağlayamayı öngören bu süreçte, değişim ve girişimin kurumun faaliyetlerini iyileştirmesindeki yeri ve önemi tartışılmazdır. Bu öğrenme döngüsü, proje yönetimi yeteneğini arttırarak iş tecrübeleriyle kazanılan öğrenme eylemine dayanır. Aynı zamanda, öğrenme döngüsü, araştırmacıya öğrenme materyalleriyle içiçe olma ve çevrimiçi tartışma gruplarında danışman öğretmenler ve araştırmacı olarak adlandırılan iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim sürecinde yer alan adaylar ile birlikte olma imkanı tanıyarak mesleki gelişimine ve kurumun gelişimine katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim sürecinde adayların birbirleriyle olan iletişim ve paydaş desteğinin araştırma projesi geliştirme ve uygulama sürecine katkısı, aynı zamanda eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yöntemi gibi temel becerilerin gelişmesinde paydaş desteğinin yeri, önemi ve etkisi araştırma boyutu olarak dikkate alınmıştır.

Araştırmanın Amacı: İş yaşamı temelli öğrenme sürecinde, adayların birbirlerine sağladığı paydaş desteği, danışman desteği ve kurumsal destek kaçınılmazdır. Bu araştırma, iş yaşamı temelliöğrenme sürecinde çevrimiçi iletişim araçları kullanılarak paydaş desteğinin araştırma projesi geliştirme, eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği, proje yönetimi gibi temel becerilerin gelişmesine katkısnı ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, paydaş desteğinin katkılarını tartışmakla, adayların mesleki gelişimlerinde önemli bir role sahip olan bu boyutu vurgulamakla özgün niteliğe sahiptir.

Araştırmanın Yöntemi: Araştırma nitel araştırma yapısını yansıtmakta, katılımcıların tecrübelerine, algılarına yönelik oluşturulmuş anlamlar üzerinde odaklanmıştır. Bu araştırmada örnek olay araştırma yaklaşımı uygulanmıştır. Araştırma, ikisi aynı kurum çalışanı olan biri ise farklı kurum ve ülkede yer alan araştırmacıların iş

yaşamı temelli öğrenme sürecindeki tecrübe ve deneyimlerini yansıtmaktadır. Araştırma konusuna bağlı, katılımcıların çevrimiçi iletişim araçlarının kullanılması ile paydaş desteğinin proje geliştirme, uygulama ve eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yönetimi becerilerinin gelişmesine katkısına ilişkin görüş, tecrübe ve deneyimlerini ortaya çıkarmak temel alınmıştır. Bu bağlamda, katılımcıların tecrübelerini daha iyi bir şekilde incelemek için detaylı görüşmeler, kişisel görüş raporu, araştırmacı gözlemleri veri toplama yöntemleri olarak araştırmada kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada kullanılan veri toplama yöntemleri, uzman görüşleri göz önünde bulundurularak hazırlanmış ve uygulamaya geçmeden önce ise pilot çalışması yapılmıştır. Detaylı görüşmeler kapsamında, bağımsız araştırmacı tarafından yaklaşık elli dakika süren görüşmeler yapılmış, araştırmada etkin rol alan iki katılımcının araştırma konusuna bağlı görüş ve düşünce ve deneyimlerini ortaya çıkarmak temel alınmıştır. Buna paralel olarak, veri toplama yöntemi olarak kişisel görüş raporları, katılımcıların paydaş desteğini örneklerle açıklamaları ve tecrübelerini yansıtmaları, eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yönetimi becerilerinin paydaş desteğine bağlı nasıl geliştiğini çevrimiçi ortamda gerçekleşen iletişim sürecinde yer alan mevcut mesajlarla örneklendirmeleri hedeflenmiş, böylelikle çevrimiçi iletişim araçları yardımıyla paydaş desteğinin nasıl oluştuğu ve eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yönetimi becerilerinin gelişimine nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla en uygun veri toplama yöntemi olarak kullanılması uygun görülmüştür. Araştırmacı gözlem raporları ise bir yıl boyunca süren araştırmada bağımsız araştırmacının gözlem ve yansıtıcı düşüncelerini kapsamaktadır. Farklı veri toplama yöntemlerinden elde edilen zengin veriler için çeşitleme kullanılmış, geçerli ve güvenilir sonuçlara ulaşılmıştır. Verilerin analizinde ise alanyazısına bağlı tespit edilen temalar yoluyla içerik analizi yapılmıştır.

Araştırmanın Bulguları: Bu araştırmada, iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim sürecinde çevrimiçi iletişim araçları yardımıyla gerçekleşen paydaş desteğinin araştırmacıların bir başka deyişle katılımcıların araştırma projesi geliştirme ve uygulamalarındaki katkısı ve aynı zamanda eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yönetimi becerilerinin gelişmesindeki yeri ve önemi ele alınmıştır. Farklı veri toplama yöntemleri olarak araştırmada kullanılan detaylı görüşmeler, kişisel görüş raporları ve gözlemler sonucunda ortaya çıkan çeşitlemeye bağlı bulgular, eleştirel arkadaş olma ve paydaş desteği, iş yaşamı temelli öğrenim sürecinde proje geliştirme ve uygulama esnasında çok önemli bir yere sahiptir. Özellikle, geliştirilen projeye farklı bakış açıları ile bakabilmek, paydaş desteği doğrultusunda daha yapıcı bir tavır sergilemek, projenin çok daha disiplinli ve stratejik hazırlanmasına ve uygulanmasına zemin hazırlayabilmektedir. Bunun yanısıra, çevrimiçi iletişim araçlarının paydaş desteğini oluşturmada köprü görevinde bulunduğu da göz ardı edilemeyecek kadar önemli bir husustur. Çevrimiçi iletişim araçlarının, katılımcıların birbirlerinden uzak olmasına rağmen paydaş desteğinin sağlıklı gelişmesinde katkıları büyüktür. Bu bağlamda, katılımcılar arasında ortak algının sağlanmasında çevrimiçi iletişim araçları çok etkili olmuştur. Buna ek olarak, katılımcılar çevrimiçi iletişim araçları

sayesinde hem paydaşlık ve eleştirel arkadaş olma niteliğini kazanmış hem de eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve araştırma yönetimi becerileri geliştirmişlerdir.

Araştırmanın Sonuçları ve Önerileri: İş yaşamı temelli öğrenme sürecinde paydaş desteği ve çevrimiçi iletişim araçlarının paydaşlık köprüsü olmada yeri ve önemini kapsayan bu araştırma, iş yaşamı temelli öğrenme sürecinde araştırmacıların bir başka deyişle öğrencilerin çevrimiçi iletişim araçlarını kullanarak paydaş olma yeteneği nasıl geliştirebileceklerini vurgulamakla, iş yaşamı temelli proje geliştirme ve uygulamada eleştirel arkadaş olmanın ve eleştirel düşünme, işbirliği ve proje yönetimi becerilerinin önemini uygulamaya dönük çalışma ile yansıtmakla örnek nitelik taşımaktadır. İleriki araştırmalar, kurum desteği ve danışman desteğinin iş yaşamı temelliöğrenme sürecinde proje geliştirme ve uygulama aşamasında olan araştırmacı olarak nitelendirilen öğrencilerin işbirliği, eleştirel düşünme ve proje yönetimi becerilerine katkıları ele alınabilinir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İşbirliği, Çevrimiçi iletişim, Paydaş desteği, İş yaşamı temelli öğrenme